Michael C. Webb, Jr. Oral History Interview
Zoe Matranga
2015-06-24
16:57 minutes

Sexuality and Spirituality

Michael Webb: It felt like a voice was talking to me and saying, “I love you no matter what.” And I do believe that voice was God, because I was tearing myself up during that time. And I feel like that moment said, like…it changed me. It really changed me. Because I felt like this huge relief. Through those tears—I was crying, I was literally on my knees crying, not like praying on my knees, you know, but like being a little baby, crying, you know, in a fetal position on the staircase, awkward slope—I just knew, you know, I just knew that like I was ok, I was normal, I was loved. I felt loved, I felt spiritually loved. And from that moment going forward I accepted myself. And I accepted myself with pride! Um, and that’s why I encourage it so much for everyone. I think currently, one of my motivations behind religion now—at least my practicing religion—is I do not know—so at that moment I did not know how to accept myself, how to love myself. Today, I do not know how we’re going to save our community. I know I cannot do it on my own. And what brought me back to God, as an adult, was me accepting the fact that we’re gonna need divine help to really make a difference in our world. And me accepting the fact that this is potentially a calling, and that we’re all connected to some extent. And in order for me to really channel that and to embrace that, I have to embrace God. So it’s similar to love for myself the first time, now so it’s more like love for my community.

College and Identity

Reed College

My priorities have always been focused on changing things. And so my experience at Reed, to summarize it in a quick synopsis is: I focused less on the academics and more on changing the environment to be better for people of color. And what surprised me about Reed was it gave me everything I wanted for me being gay. Everything. I got so much liberation there. I’ve never been so set free ever before in my life. And I also never experienced as much racism as I experienced at Reed.

Howard University

It was so empowering. And, you know, I have to be very honest, I…you’re not taught any value of blackness. You don’t understand how your heritage and culture’s rich, you don’t understand how it contributes to who we are as a country. We’re not taught that; none of us are taught that, and at Howard I was taught that we should not only be proud of our skin color, not for the fact that it’s not different than being white, but because of how much our culture and heritage has
contributed to the greatness of this country and who we are as Americans. Black people did that. And that’s something to be proud of.

**Delta Phi Upsilon**

And what I have to say, what truly attracted—I was always in search of a home. I will say that for me, I never felt like a complete person in any...at the time in any area I was in. As we discussed earlier, Reed College was amazing when it came to my sexual orientation but my blackness was not accepted, not tolerated, not in it’s totality. Not beyond the great statistics they were able to get off of me. I…I could be out at Howard but it still struggles when it comes to income inequality in black communities, there’s still struggles with sexuality in black communities. So I never felt completely whole in any of the spaces that I experienced to date, to that, at that moment. And Delta seemed like a group or a community of people who can accept us holistically. For everything we are. And that was a beautiful attraction or beautiful connection.

**mSociety Emerging Leaders Fellowship Program**

But what shocked me about the application was its beginning: in the first couple of sentences it said, “We’re starting this leadership development program because all of our black gay leaders,” and I’m paraphrasing, “died from the HIV/AIDS epidemic.” And you know, I don’t know if I made this clear before but at this time I was already HIV positive, but I wasn’t nearly to the degree as confident about my own status, nor was I even remotely public about it, to...to automatically connect with the purpose of being an HIV/AIDS advocate. But to think about something that I am battling currently, both for my self-esteem and just like physically, caused the death of a whole generation of leaders to the point where we don’t have leaders today or not enough, kinda woke something inside of me. And even though at the time I could not communicate it this way, I would argue it expressed the need for me to address my own status. I continually describe the program as transformative for me—because not only did it force me to address my own sort of insecurities around my status, it helped me connect with other people who were positive, and it also connected me to the importance of doing the work.

**HIV and Community**

I could be an HIV/AIDS advocate, I’m knowledgeable about the issues, I can communicate the issues, I can even issue talking points on Facebook. That’s an advocate. We love them, they help raise awareness. Are they willing to protest outside the City of Houston for being very incompetent for addressing HIV/AIDS in the city? I doubt an advocate would go that far, but an activist would. And I was ready to protest the City of Houston and I’m still ready to protest the City of Houston, and if it wasn’t for my current job—there is a contract with the City of Houston—I would be out fighting the City of Houston right now! But now I see myself as a community mobilizer because I recognize that you can be an activist all day long but if no one is hearing you and no one is like, with you then you’re just a crazy person holding up a sign. You
can be an advocate all day long but if no one is listening either: one, the community, or two, the establishment, then you’re just wasting your time as well, and breath.

How did I demonstrate strength through HIV? And from my perspective, I wasn’t. And so I said, there needs to be a leader of people being publically unashamed of being positive and still trying their best to live the best life they’ve always wanted to live. And then I realized that you have to do it yourself if you expect other people to do it. [laughs]…So I went public. I will be completely honest with you and say I don’t know if I would do that today, because it does change your life. But I don’t regret doing it at the same time. My concern from that is I would…as I grow, as I learn, I’m learning the root causes of all of our challenges, the root causes of homelessness, the root causes of HIV, the root causes of transphobic—phobia. And I want to position myself and my community to attack root causes. So we would not be in a position where we’re jumping from issue to issue to issue to issue and being quite honestly spent from all of that. How can we focus on what’s birthing all of our disproportionately affected issues. Whether it’s poverty, whether it’s health access, et cetera. I fear that by going public with my status, that’s all who I’m defined as.

When I went to my first appointment they confirmed the result that yes I am HIV positive—HIV positive, and the very first thing my doctor at the time said was, “You’re gonna be ok if you take care of yourself.” And that kind of, like, that changed my perspective of that a little bit, it really changed, sort of, how I was internalizing my new status. Because this whole time I think I was really subscribing to the stereotype of being positive, But her words said—and how I took it was: pretty much said you are in control of this. And I started seeing from that moment on HIV as just another challenge of life. And I’m already familiar with challenges. You know, I’m job searching, I’m finding a home, I grew up out of poverty. These are normal life challenges for a lot of people, and I managed to either work to overcome them or overcame them. And so HIV is nothing different than those normal systemic, personal, and medical challenges that we all have to go through. Be prepared for ignorance, and to decide for yourself at what degree are you going to attack that ignorance. I decided for myself I’m going to attack it systematically and culturally, from a very broad perspective, from a very awareness perspective. I’m not nec—me personally I’m not necessarily interested in having private one-on-one conversations with someone who is rooted in their ignorance. I am willing to help people grow or evolve. But even then I don’t do that in my personal life. In my personal life, and this is the boundary I set, in my personal life I am surrounded by people who are either very much aware or smart enough to become aware on their own, and not sort of force me to pretty much bring my job home. Cause that’s the boundaries I set for myself. I think it’s really important for people—for anyone who knows that they’re positive and is contemplating disclosure—to set their own level of disclosure, their own level of boundaries.

I recognize the need that one, I don’t know the community as a whole, and I mean all of our communities, is fully aware of others issues. Even for black gay men, we’re so silenced and scared and intimidated, and we’re dealing with so many other systemic issues, and that includes
racism, homophobia within our own community, the church freaking can’t get on board with anything, the NAACP discriminates against us. We’re so inundated with all these challenges that it’s hard for us, especially if we’re silent about it, to recognize the need for us to mobilize and be organized against an epidemic that’s killing us to the degree it was killing white folks in the 80s and 90s. I’ve yet to figure out how can be…how we can…who we are at our heart, our essence, our core good people, fall victim to these social norms and systems that definitely don’t empower us as black people, but I would even say to some extent encourages the development, or lack of development, in our lives. Especially for underserved communities. And so now I try my best to make our…all of our communities aware, organize us in a way where we can take even small steps towards action against a system that can come off as oppressive, and unintentionally—or intentionally!—lazy towards addressing these issues. And so that’s where I see my role in that. I don’t…I don’t know if…not saying I wouldn’t be out there or supportive, but would I organize a protest right now? I don’t think so, because I don’t think we would have a community that would back that. But I want to empower a community that is able to organize a protest if necessary. I feel confident that through organizations like Legacy in Houston we are going to see a reduction in infection rates, especially for the hardest-hit communities. I think we’re gonna see through programs like mSociety and mPowerment, we’re going to see a more empowered, more bold, more courageous black gay and bi community than we’ve ever seen before.

GLBT Political Caucus

So I got more involved. I…I start…I also recognized that there was a huge lack of diversity. It was all white old men. And, I said, I promised myself—I didn’t make this really known—that if I was to get more involved it would be my number one mission to make this the most diverse gay civil rights organization in the South. Period. And we’re on track to doing that. And I currently serve on the board of the Caucus, on the board of trustees. I also serve as membership chair. We currently have over 300 members now. I think when I started it was around 67. We’ve never been more diverse than we currently are. I argue to this day that we need more transgender people, preferably transgender people of color within our organization. That’s sort of my new mission. And I’m also currently serving as deputy treasurer.

Mindset

I operate under the mentality that you focus on your circle of influence. It helps relieve stress, first of all, it helps relieve stress when I remind myself: is this something I can actually do something about? If it’s not, I notate it, and say, ok, now I need to work on increasing my circle of influence, so eventually I can actually do something about it. For now I’ll just bitch about it. And so once I started developing that circle of influence concept that came from Emerging Leaders through mSociety, mSociety-slash-Legacy. But that’s sort of the mentality I started gaining, was: for instance, there was a lack of diversity in the Caucus. When I originally joined the Caucus there was not much I could do about that. And so I started increasing my circle of
influence, and so I became membership chair. And I got responsibility over all the membership, who currently is a member, who currently isn’t, and what’s lacking—increased my involvement in Delta and so I could use that organization to make the Caucus more diverse. And I never see one role as disconnected from the other. Which I guess could get me in trouble one day, but….And so, me advancing at Legacy, me trying to increase my circle of influence at Legacy, I see it as a direct correlation or connection with me trying to increase my influence over the Caucus, and that’s really connected with me trying to mobilize the black gay community through Delta. And anything else I’m a part of. I never walk into the room with just one hat on. I walk into the room saying, how can these group of people and these resources help this thing that I’m part of, how can we build together. I see it as a coalition, and I’m just a tool in that coalition. What I’m working on learning is the ability to inspire. I question the effectiveness of the whole ‘doomsday’ method of inspiration, meaning you know “silence equals death,” that’s one of those sort of advocate talking points that we have. Does “silence equals death” inspire people? Kind of not, right? It’s like, ugh, it’s like berating you with negative messaging to get you to act. How can we transform a more positive message to inspire people to act out of a desire, out of the kindness of their heart, and I feel like we all—well maybe not all, cause evil does exist—but most of us have the capability of being compassionate. And I use the word comprehensively compassionate. That’s the challenge, in how to inspire that out of all of us. How to inspire that out of myself! That’s what I’m working on, that’s what I’m currently working on: to get that skill.